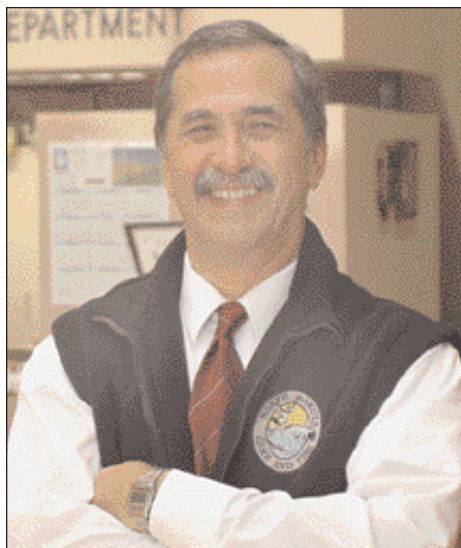




MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

While I love all seasons in this wonderful state, I have to say that spring is probably my favorite. Migrating waterfowl and neotropical birds move into and through the state, providing a great opportunity to see our diverse wildlife populations.

The warmer weather also removes ice from fishing lakes. While this is sad news for hard-core ice anglers, it means new bounty for many – and hard work for Game and Fish Department fisheries crews fighting high winds, cold water temperatures and seven-day work weeks to collect precious eggs required to augment our great fisheries. This year looks to be an even bigger challenge with rapidly warming waters, which means everything will happen quickly. Even so, fisheries crews will be doing everything they can to collect the necessary eggs, and I have no doubt they'll succeed.

Spring also means the return of white pelicans to Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge, home of the largest nesting colony of pelicans in North America. Most everyone has heard of the mass exodus of these large birds over the last two years – and I'm sure there are just as many theories as to the cause of their departure. Whatever the cause, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is attempting to determine the source and assess whether or not it can be remedied.

While white pelicans look like “flying beaks” to some people, they are, like most wildlife in North Dakota, wonderfully adaptable creatures. If you've ever noticed a group of pelicans flying, they nearly mimic the undulations of waves on waters they frequent. It's also interesting and educational to watch their method of feeding in many of the small lakes across the state. The big birds raise wings to shadow the water, while swimming toward the shallows. In my estimation, they're “herding” schools of fathead minnows or other prey into shallow water where dinner is much easier to catch. Next time you're driving or hiking out in the countryside, pay attention. It can be quite entertaining and informative.

We're anxiously awaiting runoff from the Rocky Mountains into the Yellowstone River

– and ultimately Lake Sakakawea. While it seems like eons since we had what we consider to be adequate lake elevations, it really hasn't been that long. But it also doesn't take long for low levels to have an affect on a fishery. While Sakakawea's fishery is still in pretty good shape, we need rising water (or at least stable water) this spring during the rainbow smelt spawn. This introduced fish is Sakakawea's backbone since almost every predator fish relies on it.

There is a bright side to lower lake levels and milder winters. Some of the less abundant fish species that depend on warmer waters are doing quite well. This is good for the overall health of the Missouri River System, as these species provide a short-term forage “buffer” for walleye, northern pike, and so on.

Although we're a few months away from our traditional fall seasons, I know many are already thinking about hunting waterfowl, upland birds, deer with bows and guns, the list goes on. Game and Fish Department staff is working on these seasons, with the goal of providing the maximum opportunity for those using the resource.

Dealing with North Dakota's white-tailed deer population has been a challenge. We've had high populations over the past few years due to mild winters and a host of other reasons. As a result, we've seen a high number of deer licenses issued in an effort to reduce deer numbers to manageable levels. The Department's wildlife division has done a great job of reducing deer numbers in many areas of the state. Although several criteria are used to determine if population goals are being met, it's comforting to know that deer-vehicle collisions have fallen in the past year. While we'd like to see these mishaps drop to zero, it's unrealistic.

I think it's going to be another great summer for us in North Dakota's outdoors. Opportunities abound for fishing, bird watching, canoeing, camping and other outdoor activities. Now, get out outdoors and enjoy.

Terry Steinwand